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POLITICS AND IDEOLOGY IN HUMAN SETTLEMENT: GETTING SETTLED IN THE SIKOMENA AREA OF CHIEF DOBOLA¹

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Abstract

Although the right to allocate land in the communal areas of Zimbabwe now rests with the District Councils, traditional leaders such as chiefs, village heads, informal village leaders and established landowners, continue to allocate land. This article examines the key actors who are involved in giving out land in the Binga District in the north of Zimbabwe together with the reasons why they continue to do this. The article also looks at the pattern of immigrant settlement and the reasons underlying this.

PUBLISHED MATERIAL ON traditional distribution of land in Zimbabwe such as that by Bourdillon (1987, 67–72), Holleman (1952, 6–7) and Moyana (1984, 13–14) is based on idealized accounts of customary procedures. In the Shona case, these accounts contain inconsistencies, as pointed out by Cheater (1990, 191–194). This article describes observed procedures of immigration and land distribution in an ethnically mixed community in Binga District. It shows that the inconsistencies in idealized accounts accurately reflect the variety of strategies and practices that people may adopt when they try to obtain land in a new area.

Although Binga District is a dry land area and has poor rainfall to sustain rainfed agriculture, it has abundant wildlife. In 1989, Binga District Council, made up of 23 elected members and one permanent staff, applied for, and was granted, authority from the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management to manage wildlife in its jurisdiction.² The District now conserves wildlife and refrains from subsistence poaching. More importantly, it provides a healthy habitat for its wildlife, setting aside forest land for this purpose. In particular, this means that the District must restrict human settlement into wildlife areas. In return for its management role, the Council receives income, which sometimes amounts

¹ The material for this research was gathered during fieldwork conducted in 1992–1994. Many thanks go to my colleagues in the Department of Sociology and the Centre for Applied Social Sciences for their comments on the initial draft of this article.

² The Wildlife and Parks Act of 1992 (Section 95) enables either Councils or private persons to manage wildlife under their jurisdiction.

to 25 per cent of its annual revenue, from the sale of wildlife products and from safari hunters (Murombedzi, 1992, 8).

Council distributes the revenue from wildlife among the wards making up the District. In turn, the wards distribute the money equally among villages which make up the ward.

Over the years there has been an influx of migrants into Binga, and in the area of the Zambezi Valley generally. People from the neighbouring Communal Lands of Lupane, Nkayi and Gokwe, who are in search of land and pastures, continue to settle in the Sikomena area of Binga. The Sikomena area alone has received an influx of over 300 households between 1990 and 1993. Two thirds of immigrants are Ndebele, and the remaining third are Shona. Few immigrants settle among the Tonga people; the majority form colonies of their own deep into areas designated for wildlife. Sikomena is such an immigrant colony.

Immigrants, who are agriculturalists, encroach deep into the forest. This is the case not only in Binga but in many areas in the Zambezi Valley (Reynolds, 1991, xxxii). This expansion reduces the space remaining for wildlife. The extensive burning of vegetation to make way for agriculture also scares the animals out of Binga. This is why Council does not like immigrants to settle in lands not used.

Council, which is the district land authority, cannot control the settlement process since most of the migrants bypass it when seeking land. While Council has been given the power to allocate land to people, immigrants continue to get their permission to settle in Binga from traditional leaders such as chiefs³, village heads and established landowners.

Council suspects that the local chiefs could be involved in resettling people in their pursuit of both economic and political capital. To a certain extent it is true that chiefs give out land. But as the material in the case study will illustrate, the chief is one among the many people involved in giving out land. In Sikomena, the village head, informal leaders and established landowners are also involved in giving land to immigrants.

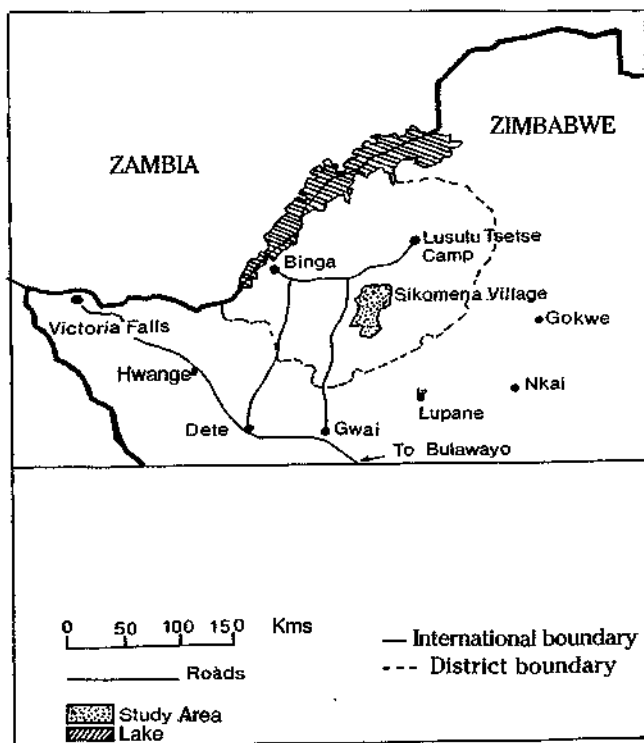
This paper is about immigration into Sikomena village, which is under the Tonga Chief, Dobola, in Binga. Until it was settled by immigrants, Sikomena was an unoccupied territory. The village is headed by a Tonga village headman, administratively helped by informal leaders. The village is part of a large administrative unit, Dobola Ward. Wards make up a district whose administration falls under Council. There is an elected Tonga councillor who represents Sikomena and other villages making up

³ Some scholars argue that such leaders are not traditional to Binga; they regard them as colonial creations, see Reynolds (1991, 21).

Dobola Ward. The village also comes under a party political structure that spans the district. Although the area is in Binga, it is recognized as a constituency of Lupane, a nearby district (see map). It lies some 120 kilometres from Hwange and is 155 kilometres along the Binga-Lusulu road (Lusulu being the district's tsetse control centre). The area used to be infested by tsetse fly but is now, like many areas in the Zambezi Valley, rid of the pest (Reynolds, 1991, xxii). Sikomena can now sustain animal husbandry. The wildlife sometimes destroys farmers' crops.

Sikomena has experienced an influx of land-seeking immigrants from Nkayi, Lupane, Gokwe and Masvingo. A primary aim of the paper is to discuss the roles in land allocation of all political actors in the village — the village head, informal leaders, established landowners and the chief. Another related aim is to understand why the immigrants are settling the way they do.

LOCATION OF RESEARCH AREA



THE VILLAGE HEADMAN

The village headman, the *sabuku*, is one of the key persons when one is looking for land. Immigrants on the whole do not consult the local Council on issues of land. This appears to be the case not only in Binga but in other parts of the Zambezi Valley which are being settled by immigrants (Murombedzi, 1992, 16; Murphree, 1992, 16). Immigrants say that the Council and its councillors are for modern development. As immigrants see it, the issue of land is the domain of traditional leaders.

Immigrants do not follow the normal resettlement procedures required by local government. Such procedures require that immigrants be cleared first by the District Council from which they come. The clearance letters must be shown to the Council where immigrants intend to settle. In practice, most of the immigrants do not have clearance letters, endorsed by Council, from their villages of origin. And of those who have such documents, few show them to Binga Council. Instead the letters are only shown to the village head for approval.

If land is available, and it almost always is, the *sabuku* allocates the land to the immigrants, defining the boundaries by means of marks, made by axe on trees. This practice is similar to that of Shona people (Bourdillon, 1987, 72). Alternatively, the *sabuku* might show the area to the immigrant, leaving him to complete the fine details about where the exact boundaries are to be. If you ask a Sikomena immigrant who drew their boundaries, the answer invariably is that it was the *sabuku*, even in cases where the farmers themselves defined the boundaries; two immigrants one of whom was a prominent Apostolic Faith member, incorporated into their holdings a river running along their pieces of land and claimed that the *sabuku* marked the boundaries.

It is said that the village head gives land freely, not for material gain. It is common, however, for immigrants to give the *sabuku* gifts — usually groceries and clothing — as a token for thanks. Although immigrants say that one can give the gift before the actual settlement, the more usual procedure is to give the gift after the event, sometimes months after.

INFORMAL LEADERS AND LAND ALLOCATION

In cases where the *sabuku* is busy, perhaps during those times when he is attending to land disputes, he allocates the responsibility of distributing land to his four 'eyes'.

The *sabuku's* 'eyes', chosen from each of the ethnic clusters of households, are always prominent persons in their neighbourhoods. They sit near him at meetings. They are very close to the *sabuku*. At all the meetings I attended these men were called by the *sabuku* to discuss the

items on the agenda before all others. They bring information of what is happening in their localities to the *sabuku*. They act as his 'eyes' enabling him to monitor events otherwise beyond the reach of the *sabuku*. These men do not always complement the *sabuku*. They are also involved in building a following of their own and, where the *sabuku's* ruling threatens their interests, they are able to work their way around such ruling. It is not clear whether the prominence of the 'eyes' derives from their right to allocate land or whether it predates these rights. I would argue that it is a combination of both: these 'eyes' have been historically prominent, and more recently, new rights associated with land allocation have enhanced their status.

These then are the people directed by the *sabuku* to give out land. This practice is also true of Shona people (Moyana, 1984, 14). Most immigrants since 1990 acquired land through the 'eye' and not directly from the *sabuku*.

Currently, the more usual procedure is that the land-seeking immigrant goes first to the 'eye' and asks for land before approaching the *sabuku*. If the 'eye' likes that particular individual, he will recommend that the *sabuku* accept the immigrant even when there is no free land in this particular area.

Mudenda, an 'eye' of the *sabuku*, allowed several immigrants to settle, even though there was no land available. He accommodated them on a portion of land belonging to a long term resident. In another case, Mudenda reallocated a piece of land he had previously given to an earlier immigrant. There is some suggestion that Mudenda received a monetary reward for this. Many local people hint that in return, Mudenda was employed to clear the land of these immigrants. (There was no suggestion that he received substantial payment directly for the land).

Although these aides claim to consult the village head when they allocate land, they do not always do this. There are a few immigrants who have been allowed by the aides to stay, but whom the village head has not authorized to stay. Evidence then suggests that it is not only formal leaders who are involved in the allocation of land and in the politics of that process.

IMMIGRANT 'LANDOWNERS' GIVING OUT LAND

There is yet another way in which new-comers can secure land. Established landowning immigrants will sometimes give land to their friends and relatives. In these cases, the established resident cuts out a piece of land from his own farm. Although some people consult the *sabuku* before the transaction, the more usual custom is for the patron and the client to do this after the deal has been agreed. Everyone regards the visit to the

sabuku as a necessary seal to the transaction and also one that gives the immigrant some legitimacy to stay.

Partly because of Council pressure against immigration, the Sikomena *sabuku* has told his aides not to accept any more immigrants. Nonetheless land hungry immigrants continue to come into Sikomena from the densely populated Nkayi and Lupane districts. Their main source of land is not the *sabuku*, but immigrant landowners. The *sabuku* is helpless because he can not stop the immigrants from helping their own kin.

Immigrants say that they themselves are moved by the plight of the incoming landless people. When pressed, however, these established immigrants say that they give land in order to increase the number of settlers in the neighbourhood, so that the elephants which eat farmers' crops can be driven away from the area. Ndebele and Shona immigrants say that it is frightening to live alone in the forest and that this is another reason they allocate land to new-comers.

Established landowners often insist that they give new-comers a limited portion of their own land and no more than that. Very often the migrant who has been given land, encouraged by the landowner, starts to encroach further into those areas which are common and are supposed to be openly accessible to everybody. Two employees of the National Railways of Zimbabwe originally settled on the fields of a friend. They were however, expanding their farms into grazing areas, where they felled trees to increase the size of their fields.

THE CHIEF

However the immigrant acquires land, the issue must ultimately come before the *subuku* who writes a letter of acceptance, which he or the immigrant takes to the chief for stamping. If the immigrant concerned has no letter from his council, he still has to go to the chief, for what appears to be a final bureaucratic rite, to let him know of his settlement. Although it is said that the chief can refuse people permission to settle, I never came across any case in which the chief in fact exercised this prerogative. The immigrant can take along some gift with him, such as a packet of groceries, because it is said the chief is an important man and should not be approached empty handed. It appears that the gift is given to transform the bureaucratic transaction into a personal one. Once the immigrant has seen the chief, he becomes a member of the chiefdom, and must comply with the rules of the land. In 1993, the chief called people to build a big house. It was said that the house would be used as a court room as well as a guest room for those wishing to stay overnight at the chief's place. It is said that everyone whose stay had been endorsed by the chief took part in the building of the house. It appears that the chief has discretionary powers over land, which he exercises from time to time. In one case he

expelled an immigrant from his land. This was at the recommendation of the community on the grounds that the person concerned was a convicted thief.

Perhaps we can draw the tentative conclusion that in Binga the chief is not remote and removed from the affairs regarding land; he is central in land issues (see also Bourdillon, 1987, 111-112).

Immigrants often say that they have no say in the allocation of land. In practice, when they approach the *sabuku*, immigrants do not passively wait to receive things as they come. Instead, they direct the attention of the *sabuku* to areas they want. Generally immigrants prefer to settle in areas where there is water, soil fertility and where people familiar to them are already settled, or where members of their ethnic group or their religious faith are located.

In cases where they are told to contact one of the four 'eyes', the tendency is to approach one whom they already know, possibly one from their area of origin. Most of the immigrants from Lupane — a Ndebele-speaking area — said that they had approached the 'eye' of the *sabuku* coming from Lupane, who inevitably put them within the Lupane fold.

In cases where the immigrant is told to go and negotiate for land for another individual, the tendency is to approach people whom one works or stays with. Immigrants whose source of land was established landowners say that they had been given land by persons known or familiar to them. As a result of such processes, the population of Sikomena is divided into distinct groups based on ethnicity or other common interests.

CLUSTERS AND SEGMENTS IN SIKOMENA

Although from outside it appears to be a composite unit, Sikomena can be divided into various clusters. First there are clusters of people who work together in Hwange, the nearest town. These people often work at the same company. Thus there is a cluster of the National Railways of Zimbabwe and another consisting of catering staff from a mission station called Fatima. There is also a cluster of miners working for Hwange Colliery.

There are also ethnic clusters. The Shona people, who form the minority in this community, are assembled together in a cluster known as 'Mashona'. Some clusters are based on religion. The members of the Apostolic Faith and Zion Church settle as a separate group.

These clusters are further segmented internally. People from the same area of the original district are clustered together. An example of this is the Jabachaba village which is made up of Ndebele people from the same area of Jabachaba of Lupane.

The Shona peoples whose ties of kinship with each other are likely to settle together, separate from other groups of Shona. So strong is the desire to settle together that new immigrants settle in grazing areas near

their associates or deep in the woods — the home of wildlife — where their kin or associates are located. I have already given examples of the National Railways of Zimbabwe people who have settled in grazing areas and are expanding into wildlife areas.

The categories are not rigid. Not all people settled in a particular group have common interests or ethnicity. Among the Shona people can be found a few Ndebele. In a Shona cluster where I dwelt, there were, out of the ten households, four that were Ndebele. And among the Zionist one could still find some members of other competing faiths.

NEGATION AND RECONSTITUTION OF CLUSTERS

The clusters do not remain fixed and discrete. Events happening in the area tend both to disrupt and confirm this segmentation. For instance, immigrants who find themselves under constant pressure from wildlife tend to move to safer areas, and this means sacrificing certain cluster preferences. Thus Nkosi, the most powerful Ndebele farmer in Sikomena and the chairperson of the local branch of the Zimbabwe Farmers Union, left his Ndebele group to settle in the safer areas occupied by the Shona people. Others move in a different direction. The two Lupahla brothers moved deep into the heart of the forest, where there is much land, away from their Ndebele fellowmen. Their neighbours now are two Tonga. Some people have also moved into Ndebele settlements.

The relocating immigrant leaves his former land to another person. In two cases familiar to me the land was left to a relation or an associate. In other cases narrated to me, the vacated land was briefly left unoccupied. After a year one immigrant returned. In another case, the immigrant never returned to his place: at the time of research, his place, like many others in Sikomena, was laid waste and degraded, prompting Council to call for the eviction of immigrants.

When an immigrant joins a new cluster, there is an inevitable tendency to renounce old ties and to adopt a new identity.⁴ All the Shona immigrants in the Ndebele cluster where I dwelt adopted Ndebele names and totems such as Sibanda, Dube or Ncube (I also changed my original Shona totem to Sibanda upon my arrival in the area).

The Shona also use Ndebele language for communication. A visitor could be misled into believing that these Shonas were not only Ndebele but genealogically tied to them. The Ndebele from the same areas regard themselves as kinsmen and all the new Ndebele people find a place in the kinship classification.

⁴ This practice is similar to that identified by Haaland (1969) among the Fur and the Bugara of Sudan.

Men from Nkayi become 'brothers' to established immigrants from the same place. Further, people from the same place tend to use common names to describe and identify themselves. All people who settle in a place now called Jabachaba, regard themselves as Jabachaba even though ten households do not originate from the Jabachaba area of Lupane. Some of them come from as far as Malawi, some from Masvingo — an entirely Shona-speaking province almost a thousand kilometres away. Clearly, then, immigrants experience a new identity when they settle in Sikomena.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

What emerges from all this? The minor point to note is that settlement is not random. People prefer to settle in familiar areas, among people of their own kind. When this is not possible and people must settle randomly, then there is a tendency by the settling person to assume characteristics of that particular cluster, and to acquire a new identity.

Clustering is an ongoing process and is made possible by the critical decisions people make in the context of events occurring in the community, like wildlife menace or scarcity of resources. Ideology of kinship and ethnicity shapes the way people settle just as ideology is in turn shaped by people in their process of making a living.

The processes by which people come to acquire land is more complicated than what Council conceives. Council regards chiefs as the only people involved in the allocation of land. What the data suggest is that there are many actors involved in the allocation of land to immigrants. Informal village leaders such as the 'eyes', immigrant landowners and village heads are all involved in land allocation to immigrants. These leaders are approached by immigrants at various points and for various reasons. The fact that many people choose to deal privately with these traditional leaders makes it difficult for Council to control settlement and the accompanying environmental damage. Consequently, it is necessary for Council to understand the various political actors and processes involved in land allocation if any meaningful control of illegal settlement and protection of the environment is to be achieved.

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